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PARENT - COUNSELOR CONFERENCES MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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Abstract

This study was designed to measure what effect the establishment of a parent-counselor relationship prior to the child's entrance into junior high school would have upon the child's adjustment to school and parent-child communication. Subjects were students and parents from Lealman Junior High School in St. Petersburg, Florida. Parents of the experimental group had a one hour individual conference with the school counselor prior to the child's entrance into junior high school. Experimental and control groups were followed over a three year period.

A significant increase ($p < .001$) in additional parental contact with the school was noted along with a significant increase in student attendance ($p < .001$) and grade point averages ($p < .001$). This was accompanied by a decrease in dropout rate ($p < .05$) and disciplinary referrals ($p < .001$). A trend was noted toward an increase in parent-child communication. An overall more effective use of school counselors and other school personnel was suggested.

The ages from 12 to 14 have been referred to by Erikson (1950) as years of identity crisis. He indicates that changing from childhood to adolescense causes a discontinuity that leads to an identity diffusion. During this identity crisis accurate, honest communication between parent and child is essential for proper role identification. Close cooperation between parent and child is vital to insure that the rebellions, moods, and fads of adolescents are recognized as symptoms of growth rather than signals of disaster. While the need for true communication is so great, actual communication between parent and child decreases to such a low ebb that adolescents are referred to as the "tuned-out" generation (Guidance Associates, 1966). This absence of communication can be seen in many areas of research. Millard (1964) has observed a life long process of poor communication between school dropouts and their families. Rutledge (1961) has found that poor communication within the parental family is followed by poor communication in marriage, thus leading to much unhappiness and many divorces. In the area of juvenile delinquency, Meissner (1965) has observed that a failure to identify with a father image, and inadequate communication with the father are central elements in the etiology of delinquency. Meliher (1966) has observed that honest communication between parent and child is necessary to produce accurate family perceptions.

The "tuned-out" generation has become a real challenge for school officials. In an effort to improve the communication between children and parents, school officials are seeking ways to increase the involvement of parents in the school life of students. Bergstein (1965) has noted a marked

trend toward more parent contact by school counselors. Brown (1963), Sylvester, (1963), and Zweibelson, et al (1965) have found parent participation in a student's school life to be most helpful. Gilmore (1967) was able to raise the academic level of six low achievers by counseling with parents only. The United States Office of Education (Fusco, 1964) has stated that a school staff needs to create a climate in which parents are assisted in accepting their responsibilities for improving the home, school and neighborhood.

As evidence of the growing concern over counselors working with parents, the American School Counselor Association has adopted a Statement of Policy for Secondary School Counselors. One of the professional responsibilities outlined for the school counselor is to:

> Assist parents to understand the developmental progress of their child, his needs, and environmental opportunities for purposes of increasing their ability to contribute to their child's development (ASCA, 1965, p. 96).

In the same statement of policy, ASCA further defines one of the related guidance services as being:

> Parent conferences, in which the counselor helps parents to better understand and accept the pupil, and to explore opportunities and resources for the pupil's growth and development (ASCA, 1965, p. 99)

The Study

This study was designed to measure the effect of increased involvement by the parents in the school life of junior high school students. It was felt that the establishment of a relationship between the parent and the school counselor prior to the child's entrance into junior high school would have a positive influence on parent-child communication and the child's adjustment to school. Seven specific hypotheses were tested. The significance

level was .05 in each case. The hypotheses were:

1. The percentage of average daily attendance for the experimental group will be greater than the control group.

2. The experimental group will have fewer schedule changes than the control group.

3. The experimental group will have fewer dropouts than the control group.

4. Disciplinary referrals will be less for the experimental group.

5. The mean grade point average of the experimental group will exceed that of the control group.

6. Overt parental interest in school, as evidenced by phone and personal contact, will be greater among parents in the experimental group.

7. Communication between parent and child will increase more in the experimental group than in the control group.

Method

The subjects for this study were the students of Lealman Junior High School in St. Petersburg (Pinellas County), Florida. The control group (N = 173) was the class of 1963-66. The experimental group (N = 168) was the class of 1964-67. The parents of the entering class of 1963 came to school for a large group orientation prior to the child entering junior high school. Parents of the experimental group came to the school individually for a one hour conference with the school counselor. To give all parents an opportunity to attend a conference, counselors were available in the evenings and on Saturday.

The conference with the parents was basically unstructured. The creation of a climate of understanding, helpfulness, and cooperation was stressed. Parents were encouraged to give the counselor information which they felt important for the school officials to know about their child. Some of the

areas explored were: home study arrangements, sibling relationships, peer group participation, parent-child communication, vocational aspiration of the child, educational plans for the child, anxiety about entering junior high school, and things related uniquely to a particular student. All questions by a parent were answered freely. All of the conferences were conducted by the two regular junior high school counselors.

Very few notes were made during the conferences. Immediately following, the counselor recorded the events and his impressions on tape. These were typed and all information, except items of a confidential nature, were placed in the student's folder for use by all the school staff. Confidential information was shared with the school staff when the counselor felt it appropriate.

The attendance, disciplinary referrals, grades, schedule changes, and dropouts were obtained from school records. The number of parent contacts was obtained from a questionnaire designed to elicit number of parent contacts with school, nature of contact, and with which school official contact was made. Communication between parent and child was measured by a forced choice Q-sort instrument, which was administered to a group of 35 parents and students in each group selected by stratified random sampling. Chi Square analysis and $\underline{t}$ test of the difference in means were the basic statistical techniques employed.

Discussions

First Hypothesis

The first hypothesis predicted that the student whose parents come to school for a counselor conference prior to the child's entering junior high school would have a higher average daily attendance than the student whose

parents did not have such a conference. The hypothesis (Table 1) was supported beyond the .001 level. While the 2.52 per cent difference between the two groups may seem small, if this difference is projected to the approximately 1,000 students in Lealman Junior High, a difference of 25.2 days of average attendance results. This is enough students to earn the school an additional teacher unit for the following year.

While the counselors are not directly responsible for attendance, it would appear the initial relationship established is carried over into a closer cooperation between parent and assistant principal who is responsible for attendance. The parents in the experimental group were more cooperative in notifying the school of prolonged absence and worked more closely with school officials in cases of truancy.

Insert Table 1 about here

Second Hypothesis

The second hypothesis (Table 2) predicted that the experimental group would have fewer schedule changes than the control group. The author anticipated that any need for schedule adjustment would be uncovered during the summer conferences and corrected prior to the child's arrival at school. During the seventh grade the reverse proved to be true. Significantly ($p < .05$) more changes were made in the experimental group than the control group.

Lealman Junior High has a modified three-track program: accelerated, average, and basic studies. The student selects the track in the seventh grade which he expects to follow throughout junior high school. While it is

not impossible to change tracks as a student proceeds through junior high, changing becomes progressively more difficult. The experimental group made significantly more ($p<.05$) changes in grade seven, and significantly fewer ($p<.05$) in grade nine than the control group.

Insert Table 2 about here

Third Hypothesis

The third hypothesis (Table 3) was that fewer students in the experimental group would drop out of school. The school dropout is usually behind his peer group in grade placement, reading level, and social adjustment. While the number of students reported failing at the end of each school year was approximately the same for both groups, considerably more students in the experimental group made up deficiencies in summer school, thus remaining even with their peer group. This is thought to be one of the factors contributing to the significant difference in the rate of dropouts between the experimental and control groups.

The physical act of dropping out is usually preceded by a period of having been a "psychological dropout", that is being in school but exhibiting little interest or achievement. Since attendance was significantly higher (hypothesis 1), disciplinary referrals significantly lower (hypothesis 4), and achievement significantly high (hypothesis 5) in the experimental group, it is believed that these "psychological dropouts" were helped by increased parental involvement in time to prevent their actual withdrawal from school.

Insert Table 3 about here

Fourth Hypothesis

The fourth hypothesis (Table 4) was that the experimental group would have fewer disciplinary referrals than the control group. There were no significant differences in the number of students referred to the assistant principal for disciplinary purposes. This would seem to verify that students naturally test the limits of their environment; however, the very large difference ($p < .001$) in the number of repeat offenders indicates that parental cooperation can reduce disciplinary referrals.

Insert Table 4 about here

Fifth Hypothesis

The fifth hypothesis (Table 5) was that the mean grade-point average of the experimental group would exceed that of the control group. While at first glance it would appear that both groups had a 2.0 or C average, the 2.59 grade point average of the experimental group is significantly ($p < .01$) higher than the 2.38 grade point average of the control group. One explanation for this is that the students in the experimental group were in class more of the time. It is felt also that the students in the experimental group were better placed as to ability and interest since they made more schedule changes in the seventh grade than the control group.

Insert Table 5 about here

Sixth Hypothesis

The sixth hypothesis (Table 6) was that the parents of the experimental group would have more overt contact with the school than the parents of the

control group. Not only was this confirmed, but some patterns evolved which the author feels are a better utilization of school officials' time. For example, in the control group most parents who came to school, came to see the principal or assistant principal. The two primary problems were discipline or grade dissatisfaction. In the experimental group, most parents came to see the counselors, with the primary problems being curriculum or grades. This appears to make better use of the counselors and to free the administration for more important duties.

Insert Table 6 about here

Seventh Hypothesis

The seventh hypothesis (Table 7) was that parent-child communication would increase more in the experimental group. While this hypothesis was not upheld ($p < .15$), it is felt the trend is very important. In the control group the parent-child communication did decrease, while in the experimental group the parent-child communication did increase. The author feels the reason for the lack of significance is due to the limitation of the items used in the Q-sort. The items were limited only to situations related to school, while parents, children, and counselors communicate about a wide spectrum of subjects. It is felt that such an instrument which would include more of the typical problems faced by adolescent students, such as sex, boy-girl relationships, peer group pressure, and values would be most useful in research of this kind and in identifying students who suffer from a communication gap. Further research is needed to verify this.

Insert Table 7 about here

Conclusions

While the only difference in the treatment of the two groups appears to be a one hour parent-counselor conference held with parents of the experimental group, the emerging parent-counselor relationship produced far better results than could ordinarily be attributed to a one hour treatment. The fact that significantly more of the parents come back to the school counselor significantly more times certainly added to the results. The information given to the school by the parents was useful to counselors, teachers, and administrators. Problems identified by the conferences received early attention. Close cooperation between parents and the school prevented other problems from developing. The parent-counselor relationship in this study proved to be most fruitful.

Table 1

Comparison of Attendance for Experimental Group and Control Group

	Total Days Absent	Total Days Present	Total Days Membership	Percent Absent
Grade 7				
Control N = 173	1520	29620	31140	4.88
Experimental N = 168	739	29501	30240	2.44
$\underline{X}^2 = 386.9^{***}$ $\underline{df} = 1$				
Grade 8				
Control N = 173	1769	29371	31140	5.68
Experimental N = 168	1270	28970	30240	4.29
$\underline{X}^2 = 123.8^{***}$ $\underline{df} = 1$				
Grade 9				
Control N = 173	2267	28873	31140	7.28
Experimental N = 168	1071	29169	30240	3.56
$\underline{X}^2 = 626.5^{***}$ $\underline{df} = 1$				
Junior High Totals				
Control N = 173	5530	87890	93420	5.92
Experimental N = 168	3080	87640	90720	3.40
$\underline{X}^2 = 1037.9^{***}$ $\underline{df} = 1$				

*** $p < .001$

Table 2

Comparison of Schedule Changes Made by Experimental Group and Control Group

	Students Having Schedule Changes	Students Having No Schedule Changes	Percent Having Changes
Grade 7			
Experimental	43	125	25.6
Control	32	141	18.4
$\underline{X}^2 = 5.60^*$	$\underline{df} = 1$		
Grade 8			
Experimental	24	144	14.3
Control	30	143	17.3
$\underline{X}^2 = 1.04$	$\underline{df} = 1$		
Grade 9			
Experimental	17	151	10.1
Control	29	145	16.7
$\underline{X}^2 = 5.18^*$	$\underline{df} = 1$		
Junior High Totals			
Experimental	55	113	32.7
Control	63	110	36.3
$\underline{X}^2 = .96$			

$^*p < .05$

Table 3

Comparison of Dropouts for Experimental Group and Control Group

	Dropouts	Completed Junior High	Total
Control	8	173	181
Experimental	2	168	170

$\underline{\chi^2} = 4.72$ *
$\underline{df} = 1$

* $p < .05$

Table 4

Comparison of Disciplinary Referrals for Experimental Group and Control Group

	Number of Students Referred	Number of Students Not Referred	Totals
Control	70	103	173
Experimental	66	102	168

$\underline{\chi^2} = .38$
$\underline{df} = 1$

Comparison of Repeat Disciplinary Referrals for Experimental Group and Control Group

Control		Experimental			
Mean	S. D.	Mean	S. D.	df	t
4.8	2.1	2.4	1.3	339	11.6 ***

***$p < .001$

Table 5

Comparison of Grade Point Average for Experimental Group and Control Group

	Control		Experimental			t
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	df	
Grade 7	2.33+	.75	2.60+	.75	339	3.31***
Grade 8	2.40	.58	2.58	.71	339	2.57**
Grade 9	2.41	.74	2.60	.75	339	2.36*
Junior High Totals	2.38	.74	2.59	.73	339	2.59**

+Scale A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, D = 1, F = 0
*p < .05
**p < .01
***p < .001

Table 7

Comparison of Change in Level of Communication for Experimental Group and Control Group

	Control	Experimental
Pretest	range r = .167 - .858	range r = .275 - .800
	mean r = .598	mean r = .589
	mean Fisher Z+ = .6900	mean Fisher Z = .6763
Posttest	range r = .167 - .783	range r = .342 - .808
	mean r = .576	mean r = .591
	mean Fisher Z+ = .6570	mean Fisher Z = .6796
Mean Difference Pre to Post	-.0396	.0028
S.D. of difference	.450	.401
t = 1.15	df. = 52	N = 27 in both groups

+ Fisher Z score conversion from tables in DuBois, Philip H. An Introduction to Psychological Statistics. New York: Harper and Row, 1965, pp. 504-507.

Table 6

Comparison of Overt Parent Contact with School Officials for Experimental Group and Control Group

	Control	Experimental			
Number of Contacts with School After Initial Conference					
0 Times	73%	13%			
1-2 Times	7%	33%			
3-5 Times	8%	36%			
6 or more Times	12%	18%			
	N = 119	N = 130			
	Mean S.D.	Mean S.D.	df	t	
	2.1 2.49	3.3 2.09	247	4.09***	
School Official with Whom Contact Made			df	X^2	
Principal	(67) 56.2%+	(33) 25.3%+	1	49.9***	
Assistant Principal	(44) 36.9%	(39) 30.0%	1	2.7	
Counselor	(26) 21.6%	(85) 65.3%	1	147.8***	
Teacher	(20) 16.8%	(33) 25.0%	1	6.6	
Nature of Contact					
Curriculum	(18) 15.4%+	(51) 39.2%+	1	56.7***	
Discipline	(60) 50.6%	(23) 17.6%	1	56.8***	
Illness	(16) 13.6%	(26) 20.0%	1	4.1*	
Grades	(44) 36.9%	(39) 30.7%	1	2.7	
Teachers	(24) 20.4%	(12) 9.2%	1	10.3**	
Personal	(17) 14.8%	(20) 15.3%	1	.31	
Other	(8) 6.6%	(10) 7.6%	1	.11	

+Totals more than 100% because more-than one answer checked

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

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